

## NATIONAL TRANSPORTATION SAFETY BOARD

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In the Matter of: \*  
\*  
"FIRE ON BOARD M/V COLUMBIA" \*  
DOCKET NO. DCA-00-MM030 \*  
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## INTERVIEW OF:

CAPTAIN NORM EDWARDS  
Vessel Operations Manager

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Date: June 13, 2000

Place: NTSB Command Post at Juneau, Alaska  
Fire Fighter's Training Classroom Building

Interviewed by: Captain Anthony H. Murray  
NTSB Office of Marine Safety  
Operations Group Chairman

## P R O C E E D I N G S

1  
2 CAPTAIN MURRAY: Today is June 13, the Year  
3 2000. It is Tuesday and we are in Juneau, Alaska at  
4 the NTSB Command Center. And we are interviewing  
5 Captain Norm Edwards. Captain Edwards is the vessel  
6 operations manager for the Alaska Marine Highway  
7 System.

8 Captain Edwards, please give us a little bit  
9 of your background in the maritime industry and also  
10 just give us some details of your discovery or learning  
11 of the fire onboard the Motor Vessel Columbia, and some  
12 of the, explain some of the papers that you have  
13 presented to me here in front of us, the organizational  
14 chart of the company, the schedule of the ship, and  
15 also your public relations, media relations, fact  
16 sheet, your gathering of information from passengers  
17 and also your interaction with the Coast Guard.

18 Captain Edwards.

19 CAPTAIN EDWARDS: Good afternoon, Tony. I am  
20 Captain Norm Edwards and here is my card. I joined the  
21 Alaska Marine Highway System in July 7th of 1998,  
22 onboard the Motor Vessel Kennicott on its maiden  
23 voyage, and I came to the Marine Highway after spending  
24 30 years in the Coast Guard as a commissioned officer.  
25 I graduated from the Coast Guard Academy in 1968. I  
26 sailed all coasts and Great Lakes, the Barren Sea and  
27 the Gulf of Alaska and had five commands at sea.

1 I came to this job with a real desire to make  
2 a difference in the Marine Industry and the Alaska  
3 Marine Highway System, in particular. And it has been  
4 a great experience for me.

5 In the Alaska Marine Highway System and as  
6 the operations manager of the system, I am basically  
7 involved in the day to day operation of the system. We  
8 have nine ships that operate in coastal Alaska. They  
9 are all roll on, roll off passenger vessels, of which  
10 the Columbia is our largest. The flagship of the  
11 fleet, you might say. Columbia is, runs a weekly  
12 schedule in the summertime, the height of our travel  
13 season. It runs from Bellingham, Washington to  
14 Skagway, Alaska. That is a weekly schedule. On this  
15 date, Tuesday, the 6th of June, Columbia was in route  
16 from Auke Bay or Juneau, Alaska to Sitka with 434  
17 passengers aboard. And I have provided a spider chart  
18 here, a graph which sort of shows the schedule that  
19 each ship keeps each week during the summer.

20 On the 6th of June, it was about 12:45 when  
21 the port captain came to my office and said we have an  
22 emergency on the, onboard the Columbia, a fire in the  
23 engine room. And immediately, we went into gear to find  
24 out what kind of information we could and what sort of  
25 resources we had to assist the vessel. Gee, which is  
26 Captain Lynn Melin, took the role of maintaining  
27 communications with the ship via cell phone to get all

1 the information we could on that fire. And we were  
2 notified at the time that the fire was contained, that  
3 it was in the switchboard and that no one was injured,  
4 but there was heavy smoke.

5 We also were advised the Taku, Motor Vessel  
6 Taku was on scene and that. If one looks at this  
7 wiring diagram, they can see where those schedules  
8 cross and that is where it was in Chatham Strait, three  
9 miles offshore, plenty of water. Weather conditions  
10 were basically calm. So, they were conducive for those  
11 two ships to come together if they needed to.

12 The other resource that was available was the  
13 Coast Guard Cutter Annacapa, which happened to be in  
14 Chatham Strait at the same time and very close to their  
15 location. So, we immediately started to look for  
16 resources, since, since Columbia was dead in the water,  
17 we needed tug assist to get the ship in. And we  
18 discussed with the captain our alternatives, being,  
19 those being maintaining if the fire was out, we would,  
20 we thought about keeping the passengers onboard and  
21 just towing it to Juneau. But, then the, it came to  
22 our realization that the tug was not readily available  
23 and it would be some time, so, we discussed then how  
24 soon we could get the passengers off, put them on Taku  
25 and bring them to Auke Bay, so that we could get them  
26 taken care of and away from the scene of the fire and  
27 possible further complicate that incident.

1                   So, the captains, Captain Brereton on the  
2 Columbia and Captain Reid on the Taku talked about the  
3 plan of bringing the Taku along side and weather  
4 conditions were right for it. The Taku came up on the  
5 leeward side of the Columbia and in the lee of that  
6 larger ship and made a beautiful landing. Aboard, there  
7 was no problem with the transfer. They used a few  
8 planks, and, and plywood to construct a gangway from  
9 one car deck to the other car deck, which lined right  
10 up, and safety ropes and it also had one of the, one of  
11 the fast rescue boats from the Motor Vessel Taku  
12 remaining in the water right on scene, so, if there was  
13 anyone that did go into the water.

14                   It was a very safe evolution and during the  
15 process of planning for this, the fire was eventually  
16 put out, because it smoldered for quite some time, due  
17 to the intense heat that was in it.

18                   We were getting reports periodically from  
19 them. We started, as I said, at 12:45 with the  
20 information gathering and the notification. There was  
21 a, the main part that I played, that initial part was  
22 to determine the resources that we had and let, advise  
23 those people who would be assets to us that we had this  
24 situation. I contacted the Coast Guard, I talked with  
25 Captain Regalbuto, the Chief of Staff there in the  
26 District Office(USCG), he advised that there was a  
27 helicopter in route. We wanted to put an engineer

1 onboard to evaluate ourselves of the damage and assist.

2 The Coast Guard was agreeable to pick Dave Rikel up  
3 and deliver him to the ship, in addition, with the two  
4 fire fighters that went to the Columbia.

5 We also had the assistance and requests or  
6 the offers from a couple of different tug companies to  
7 provide assistance. We ended up getting the Chahoenta  
8 which provided a tow, after their initial tugs got on  
9 scene, the Banner and another assist tug arrived on  
10 scene about 1700. So, that was the initial response to  
11 it.

12 We had, because we are trained in ISM and we  
13 have the organization of an incident command group, we  
14 establish an incident command center, about 13:10 that  
15 afternoon and in that the general manager, myself, the  
16 port captain, the terminal manager, and also our  
17 passenger support people and a representative of our  
18 support services supplying procurement, gathered in our  
19 command, at our command post to feed information to the  
20 ship, provide and connect with resources that could  
21 assist the ship, and also to gather as much information  
22 as we could so we could keep both the Commissioner  
23 advised, because he was advising the Governor's Office,  
24 and also the press. We had the Deputy Commissioner,  
25 who was basically assigned to take care of the press  
26 inquiries, since Commissioner Perkins realized when I  
27 had reported to him the incident, that we were not

1     staffed to do that and we did not have a press person  
2     available. So, essentially the press were kept advised  
3     through another office, which was a great asset to us.

4             We then went, from the incident command  
5     center, we established the needs of our people and put  
6     together a plan for how we were going to take care of  
7     434 passengers. Certainly the overriding thing that  
8     was a comfort to us, is that (1) the fire was contained  
9     right off. The fire then was put out in fairly short  
10    order. But, there was no one hurt. We did not have to  
11    provide medical assistance. There were two incidents  
12    of some assistance that the Coast Guard provided after  
13    passengers got on the Taku. One person had an anxiety  
14    attack, was Medivaced from the Taku and another person,  
15    who was, had an asthmatic condition, had to be taken  
16    care of. But, as far as direct injury from the  
17    incident, there wasn't any. So, that was a great  
18    relief at least to us. And led to a smoother  
19    evolution.

20            The Columbia, while Taku was along side, did  
21    drift closer to shore, so, the Taku was used as a tow  
22    boat, too, to bring her out in midstream in Chatham  
23    Strait. So, there wasn't any problem with her getting  
24    near foul water. And that also provided less anxiety  
25    for all concerned.

26            We did provide assistance for the passengers,  
27    for bringing 434 displaced passengers was a challenge

1 into Auke Bay. So, we put a plan together where we  
2 would address the needs of those passengers in the near  
3 term, that is what we were going to do with them on  
4 Tuesday night. We had a plan to put some aboard the  
5 Motor Vessel Malaspina, which was tied up, would be  
6 tied up there overnight, because it is on the Lynn  
7 Canal run, and the Motor Vessel Taku, which was the  
8 vessel that took these folks. We have the Motor Vessel  
9 Taku, which picked up the passengers off of the  
10 Columbia, also had accommodations. So, we made  
11 arrangements to house passengers aboard them. And then  
12 put the remainder ashore in two different hotels.

13 One of the things that really concerned us in  
14 making this smooth evolution is that we had a 128 cars  
15 onboard the Columbia. And we needed to move those  
16 before the passengers were sent off in the different  
17 directions because the main concern was their property  
18 and what was going to happen to it. And before we sent  
19 the ship to the shipyard. So, that was one of the main  
20 reasons that even though we had the passengers off of  
21 the Columbia, we brought the Columbia to Juneau instead  
22 of to Ketchikan, for instance, where there is a  
23 shipyard and where we have another berth, but we  
24 brought it to Juneau. And that was, that certainly was  
25 the right thing to do.

26 A concern was how we were going to get those  
27 cars off the next morning when the ship got in, so we



1     could continue with our investigation of what happened  
2     and then also proceed on with making preparations to  
3     repair. We decided that to control, to keep those  
4     folks who had vehicles on as close by as we could. So,  
5     we put them aboard the ships. And that made a pretty  
6     clear division. We had enough staterooms for them and  
7     we put all the others that were located, that lived in  
8     Juneau, and those who were just walk on passengers  
9     ashore.

10           The real, the real challenge was to get those  
11     people divided up on the ship and everybody had, you  
12     know, had their own, had their own desire to find out  
13     where they were going. So it took a little while. We  
14     arrived, the ship arrived just about 9:45, about 7:45,  
15     and we went aboard and talked with them. And I  
16     provided a sheet, which was a handout for our  
17     passengers, which sort of told them what our game plan  
18     was. And I felt that this was helpful to them for  
19     they, they could, if they took off, at least they had  
20     something they could refer to, because we wanted them  
21     all back there the next morning, so we could book them  
22     for passage to their destination.

23           The Columbia, being our largest vessel did,  
24     we did not have the capacity on either the Malaspina or  
25     the Taku to take all passengers and vehicles. And  
26     vehicles was really the limiting factor. We could take  
27     88 vehicles on the Malaspina. And we did. We took

1 those that were going to Sitka, and a portion of those  
2 that were going to Bellingham, and their corresponding  
3 passengers onboard that ship the next day. The Taku  
4 took the remainder. The Taku went to Wrangell,  
5 Petersburg and then Ketchikan, with the remainder. And  
6 then Malaspina and Taku joined up in Ketchikan and  
7 Malaspina took the residual that were all going to  
8 Bellingham. And so, that is how we did it up. And it  
9 was amazing in all those efforts that by that time  
10 everyone had a cabin between Ketchikan and Bellingham.  
11 It was just a blessing in disguise.

12 We did manage to send people, get people to  
13 where they were. Those walk-on passengers that were  
14 worried about making connections, they had made  
15 arrangements to fly and basically were on their way.  
16 But, it was, it was a very intense situation for  
17 awhile, but after a good night's sleep, most everybody  
18 was calm and satisfied that we were doing the best we  
19 could. And I think everyone worked very hard to meet  
20 the needs of our passengers.

21 Because the Coast Guard was, is certainly  
22 investigating the, this incident and wanted to know as  
23 much, they had also put a passenger statement together,  
24 which I brought a copy of, and just to provide for you,  
25 Captain Tony, that I know you probably have collected  
26 those comments, but that was something that we handed  
27 out also initially to get feedback from the passengers

1 on the incident.

2 I brought a news release that we sent out,  
3 which was initially, on the initial new release on the  
4 fire. I don't know if you have of copy of that, but  
5 that, this is what we told the public. And there was a  
6 lot of interest as you can imagine on this and there  
7 still is.

8 We basically now have had to rework our  
9 schedule for our ships and that has kept us busy over  
10 the last few weeks and we are, or the last few days,  
11 and we are now getting ready to send Columbia off to  
12 its destination for repair, we hopefully is not in the  
13 too distant future.

14 CAPTAIN MURRAY: Okay. All right. Well, thank  
15 you very much, Captain Edwards. You have given us a  
16 very detailed explanation of the events, especially the  
17 management oversight during the incident. And also I  
18 would like to thank you on behalf of NTSB on all your  
19 help, to our members, and my colleagues during this  
20 investigation. You have provided anything we have  
21 asked for, all the documents, ISM codes, mounds of  
22 paper material. And also just for the record, I would  
23 like to state that you are on the committee, the  
24 working group for the operations factual reports. And  
25 I just again, personally, I would like to thank you for  
26 all your help and everything you have done to make our  
27 stay here in Juneau, Alaska pleasant. Thank you,

1 Captain Edwards.

2 CAPTAIN MURRAY: You are sure welcome, Tony.  
3 And it has been a pleasure working with you. I have,  
4 my very first time working with the NTSB, and it has  
5 been a very positive experience and I hope that you can  
6 find the things that will help us, will help us out in  
7 the future.

8 UNIDENTIFIED SPEAKER: Okay. This completes  
9 our interview.

10 (Whereupon, the interview was concluded.)